

# Tamil Youth Unemployment – As One of the Prominent Reasons for the Tamil Militant Movement of Sri Lanka in the 1970's

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**Abstract:** *Sri Lankan civil war is a well known issue in the international political arena partly because this conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) has lasted for nearly three decades and was one of the longest running civil wars in Asia. The crucial influences of this war caused catastrophic damage to the Tamil and Sinhalese social lives. A large number of people lost their lives and the Sri Lankan economy was drastically damaged due to this terrible conflict. Territories in the Northern and Eastern provinces were the worst affected whilst the entire island was threatened by suicide bombings and other deadly attacks as a result of this long term brutal war. In such dire conditions various researchers have attempted to decipher the grass root reasons which contributed towards the Tamil youth uprising. This paper aims at finding out how the emergence of the Tamil militant movement occurred as a result of the Tamil youth unemployment leading to the movement. The Tamil military movement emerged significantly during the 1970's of the Jaffna peninsula in Sri Lanka. Therefore this paper will draw its attention to the Tamil youth unemployment in 1970s.*

**Keywords:** Tamil youth, unemployment, violent, education, policies, frustration

## 1. Introduction

At the beginning of the 1970's the Sri Lankan people faced many economic difficulties. The Government was unable to fulfill even the basic needs of the citizens. From 1960 to 1977, Sri Lanka spent nearly 10 percent of its GNP (Gross National Product) annually on its welfare programs including the expansion of education. Through these programs Sri Lanka was able to maintain an exceptional type of a „welfare state“ which was exceptional when considered with relation to most of the other developing and even fast growing countries in the third world. The extensive welfare system also resulted in a rapid growth of the country's population, which almost doubled during the period of 30 years from 1950 to 1980. Especially the younger generation was rapidly increased amongst the total population. For instance half of the total population belonged to the age group below 20 years, and more than one-fourth to the age group below 10 years during the period of 1950s-1970s (Abeyratne 2002). This created a huge pressure on the economy. As mentioned above even Sri Lanka receive human development in order to that welfare policies, Sri Lanka was lag behind of enough economic growth. The sluggish economy could not meet the rising expectations of such a vast number within the younger generation. Both Sinhala and Tamil youths wanted greater opportunities for education, employments and political participation. As a result of frustration the Sinhala rural youths engaged in anti-government riots in the April of 1971 (JVP insurrection). The sense of deprivation and disillusionment with the state and the ruling class was much greater among the Tamil youths than the Sinhalese. They thought that they had special grievances compared to the Sinhala youths because of their minority position. They believed that they were the main group being severely discriminated by successive governments in Colombo. The JVP insurrection had provided the most effective examples and inspirations for the Tamil youths. It directly subjected

sharp radical feelings against the contemporary Tamil youth. Gradually they started to form underground organizations. It is worth to acquire crystal clear identification with regards, to how and why the emerge of Tamil militancy in the 1970s rather than observe the nature of such underground organizations. There were number of interlink multiple factors which were behind of Sri Lankan Tamil violent movement. Among those numerous issues, which were existed in 1970s among Tamil youths „unemployment „ was a most significant and powerful issue.

## 2. Unemployment of Tamil youths in 1970s

As pointed out above, Sinhalese government(s) expanded Sri Lankan education, after independence. For example increasing the number of schools, improving school facilities, strengthening teacher cadres, changing the medium of instruction from English to the local languages, providing scholarships and other forms of assistance to needy students etc.. As a result of those developments Sinhalese received maximum opportunities in secondary and University fields. But Sri Lankan Tamils (Specially Jaffna high caste Tamils) had received eminent opportunities, even in the colonial period in the university education and prestigious professions, as a result of their English competency and special favoritism of colonial rulers. But due to post independence social welfare policies Sri Lankan Tamils and Burghers lost their educational and professional privileges. Gradually Tamil youths became unemployed positions even towards the end of the 1960's. However, this tendency was most significant in the 1970's. Because as mentioned previously unemployment was, of course, not a problem confined to one ethnic group during the 1970's. It could be visible amongst the Tamils as well as the Sinhalese that while the expansion of employment opportunities had persistently lagged behind the rate of growth of the labour force. Unemployment amongst the 14-18 age group, for example, as a percentage of the workforce in the country rose

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from 47.5 percent in 1963 to 65.8 percent in 1973. For the 19-25 age group the percentages were 30.3 and 47.5 respectively (Central Bank of Ceylon, 1974, p 48). Unemployment among the GCE/OL and GCE/AL qualified as a percentage of the workforce, in 1973 was 44.4 percent (Central Bank of Ceylon, 1974, p 48). Hence there had been an intensifying competition among aspirants to employments. In order that Tamil youths of upper and middle layers entered to find jobs through personal links, in electoral politics. But youths from lower layers of both communities were severely deprived as they did not have such connections. As pointed out above due to this situation the deprivation youth, from the lower social economic strata in Sinhala society, aggressively engaged in anti-government violence in 1971.

After the 1971 riots, a variety of policies were introduced by the Sri Lankan government to reduce youth unrest of Sinhala youths. Among those policies Standardization policy and District Quota System were held predominant standard. But those policies directly subjected to increase unemployment among Tamil youths. In order to that it is worth to take certain identification regarding the nature of those educational policies.

Even Sinhalese receive prominent level in the university education after result of post-independence policies, their compositions of prestigious faculties (Faculties of Science disciplines) were represented relatively low standard. But the Tamil percentages of faculties of Science disciplines were numerically higher compared to the Sinhalese. The reason was, at the beginning of the 1970s a competency in English was a valuable extra qualification to enter faculties of Science disciplines. High class English educational opportunities and equipment which were need to science base education had been protected in the Jaffna peninsula even after the independence (Silva, 1997, p86). But science oriented educational facilities were not properly established in the Sinhala rural areas even after the independence (Jayasuriya, 1965, pp91-95). Towards the beginning of the 1970's the number of Arts graduates that were produced was vast however, the UF (United Front) government failed to provide satisfactory job opportunities for such a large number of Arts graduates. Owing to this the mental and social depressants of unemployment caused the rural youths to take up arms as mentioned above on the 5th April 1971 against the government. Under this situation the process of Standardization was introduced by the government with expecting to create similar representations in the science faculties of universities according to the racial representations of total population. Even though this policy was directed specifically against Tamil students. As explained by K.M. De Silva, "The qualifying mark for admission to the medical faculty was 250 out of 400 for Tamil students, whereas it was only 229 for the Sinhalese. Worse still, this same pattern of a lower qualifying mark applied even when Sinhalese and Tamil students sat for the examination in English medium" (Silva, 1984, p 107). In order to introduce the standardization policy, Tamil representation of Science faculties was drastically restricted. The number of Tamils admitted to university shrank between 1970 and 1975 from 39.8 per cent to 19.0 per cent. While total university admissions increased every year and

the number of Sinhalese students entering had kept pace, admissions of Tamil students were lag behind (Cheran, 2009, p xxx).

Whilst implementing the District Quota system, the government tried to reduce the geographical imbalance in the university admission system. Educational facilities were spread out unequally over the country in that period. For instance the Northern and Western provinces experienced excellent educational facilities. In contrast, Central, Uva, Sagaragama provinces experienced less educational facilities. Due to this situation only a very few students of those provinces were qualified to enter the university. So the government hoped to give special offers and chances to students of less developed districts under this policy. As a result, students of less developed rural provinces were given the maximum advantages in university education. Ultimately Sinhala students from rural areas received maximum benefits through this policy. For instance, Sinhala students made 75.4% of science faculties, 78% of engineering faculties and 70.0% of medical faculties in 1974. The percentage of university entrance of Sinhala student was increased in 1975, 78.0% of science faculties, 83.4% of engineering faculties and 78.9% of medical faculties were made by them in that year. They held the most prominent place of Arts faculties as 85% in 1975 (Silva, 1978, p 93). Not only Sinhalese, representations of Muslims also had increased more than before (Silva, 1978, p 93). The number of Muslim citizens had scattered in the Eastern province of Sri Lanka. Until now they had received fewer opportunities in Sri Lankan education system. But after introducing the District Quota system they qualified to enter the prestigious faculties of universities. Their number in science faculties doubled between 1970-1975. Tamil representations of Universities had decreased drastically. Representation of Tamils in science faculties had decreased up to 20.9% in 1974 (they were made 25.9% in 1973 and 35.3% in 1970). Similarly their percentages of engineering and medical faculties had decreased up to 16.3% and 25.5%. In 1973, 337 Tamil students qualified to enter the science faculties of universities. Even though in 1974, that limit had been decreased up to 294. This situation worsened in 1975. Their percentages of science and medical faculties decreased down to 14.2% & 17.4% in that year (Silva, 1978, p 93). Their overall representation of science discipline had been decreased up to 19% in same year.

Traditionally, Tamils acquired their economic success through employment of white-collar professional employment, agriculture and trade activities. As mentioned above, when consider about employment sector high caste Tamils received eminent opportunities in the elite class professional sector even in the colonial period due to their English competency. But as a result of above policies absolute numbers of Tamil percentage in the state sector professions were reduced and corresponding increases in the Sinhalese share. Following data clearly reflects the decreased Tamil representation in the state sector at the end of 1970s.

### 3. Ethnic Composition of Public Sector Employment in 1980

% of the total employed			
	Sinhalese	Tamil	Other
Professional and Technical	82	13	05
Administrative and Managerial	83	14	03
All categories	85	11	04

**Source;** Department of Census & Statics (1980) Census of Public and Corporate Sector Employment, Colombo

Further it is important to identify the decline in the Tamil share in certain elite –fields of employment. Following set of data will reflect enough knowledge that how to decrease Tamil composition in white –color segment of the work force during the period of 1948 to 1980.

#### Ethnic Composition of Employment in Selected Government Services (% of the total employed in each field)

Field and Year /Period	Sinhalese	Tamil	Others
Executive Grades (general administration)			
1948	53.9	24.7	21.4
1979	85.2	13.1	1.7
Doctors, Health Department			
1948	57.3	32.2	10.1
1879	55.5	43.5	0.9
Police (high ranks)			
1948	39.0	5.1	55.3
1979	75.7	17.4	6.9
Engineers (Irrigation Department only)			
1948	31.1	40.0	20.9
1981	57.1	38.9	3.7
General Clerical Service			
1949	53.7	40.7	5.6
1978-81	93.6	5.4	1.0

( Samarasinghe ,1984 ;177-178)

From the above data it is worth noting the decline of the absolute numbers of the Tamil percentage in the elite class professions and also concurrently increases in the Sinhalese representation ,except in the case of government doctors. Especially when consider about Tamil share in middle grade government employment like Clerical Service , it is able to identify that how to decrease of Tamil share in such largest middle grades segment of the workforce. As a result of governments implement Sinhala language for official activities , since end of 1950s, huge barriers were created over Tamil youths for entrance of clerical services. Therefore their representations in such fields were drastically dropped.

Under this conditions, at the end of 1970`s unemployment clearly increased amongst the Tamil youths in the Jaffna peninsula. The majority of those educated Tamil youths represented the Jaffna Vellalah caste. They were the main group who were directly victimized by the official language policy, standardization and District based education policy. Because they were the main group who deserved eminent educational privileges in the traditional Tamil society. As pointed out previously, they represented absolute numbers of percentage in the elite field professions , according to their English competency, since in the colonial period .But when 1970s unemployment was severely raised among Vellalah

Tamil youths as a result of educational policies which introduced by Sinhalese governments. .One of founding member of LTTE name Ragavan has given lengthy discussion regarding, how the Jaffna Tamil youths were negatively affected due to standardization and district based education policy. As pointed out him Jaffna Tamils had good opportunities to access to upward social mobility as their educational qualifications even in beginning of 1970. But the Tamil youth, especially from Jaffna perceived this as an act against Tamils (Ragavan, 2009). Under this situation such discriminated Vellalah youths also felt that the Vellalah Tamil national elite in the Parliament did not do anything to protect their previous position in the professional field. In order to that gradually they became towards aggressive involvements and entered to form some illegal student associations around the Jaffna University. Specially Tamil Student Federalism formed by Tamil youths in 1972 as a reaction to the standardization. .Ragavan(2009) mentioned that""students took up this cause and there was a major protest in Jaffna against standardization in 1970 . I was a student at that time and I remember going to the protest march. It was a reasonably peaceful march in which thousands of students from 8<sup>th</sup> Standard to University participated, and it was organized by the Maanavar Peravai (Student Front) led by Sathiyaseelan. I can recollect some of the slogans which claimed that Tamils were a great educated people. -----the standardization policy, which affected Jaffna Tamil middle class students, was the main catalyst for the militancy.""

Unemployment and youth unrest was most significance amongst the Tamil youths in lower social states rather than Vellalah group. As mentioned previously the Vellalah group was the dominant community who deserved eminent educational and professional qualifications in the Tamil society. But educational and professional rights of the Vellalah group also were limited under post-independence government policies .When dominant group was skip out from major path, miner communities from lower and middle layers were automatically be thrown away. They could not able to fight to acquire professional qualifications in the open competition with majority Sinhalese as well as English educated Vellalah dominant group. Because their educational qualifications were not possible to received significance values in the current society. Even in the colonial period high class educational facilities were established by colonial rulers and missionary organizations in Jaffna peninsula. But Tamil students of depressed caste were not able to access towards such schools due to traditional caste barriers of Tamil society. But the introduction of free education system and Swabasha medium were directly subjected to create radical changes in the socio-educational set-up of Jaffna (Sivathamby,1984, p.137). Gradually lower caste Tamil children also received educational opportunities through government schools. But government education was mainly centered on vernaculars which was not received economic value in 1970s. Even Vellalah students became unemployed position, there were remain certain windows among them ,to access towards private sector employments according to their English competency even in 1970s. Because after 1977,private sector was expanded in Sri Lanka with open economy. Number of modern professions were opened up by private

sector for English speak youth community(Hettige, 2004 p 123). Similarly, the elite class citizens could have the possibility to depart from the island and gain access to adequate opportunities as a result of their family background. (Sivathamby,1984,p 138). But situation of lower level Tamil youths was worst. They did not have possibilities to access significant socio-economic dignity as their lower level family back ground and lack of English competency. Therefore unemployment was strongly affected over vernacular educated lower level Tamil youths. In order to that ,when consider about social situation of Jaffna in 1970s,it was able to notice, bulk of unemployed Tamil youths who were from affluent middle class or lower strata Tamil society. Most of them were received education up to GCE/OL or GCE/AL. There were 41% of young Tamil mails with GCE/AL qualifications were unemployed at the time.(Tambiah, 1986,p 153) .

Similarly it is noticable that there were some youths who skipped out on school in the level of grade five, six or seven etc. For example even V.Prabhakaran who was a leader of LTTE had skipped out his education when he was in grade five (Samaranayaka,1991 ,p 226). According to the report on Consumer Finances and Socio – Economic Survey 1978-79 ,“no-schooling” figure of Tamils was increased from 19.45 % to 23.54% during the period.(Central Bank of Ceylon,1983,,p 31) They had been naturally became unemployed position and their situation was most pathetic.Those education levels provided hardly any prospects for improvement of income and elevation of social status for the Tamil youths. Majority of those deprived Tamil youths mainly started under ground aggressive activities around fishing village in Valvettithurai .Ragvan(2009) has given following statement that how he reacted due to unemployment when he was in young age.”“I also had a rebellious character and I wanted to leave the family as soon as possible, even before I joined the LTTE, I wanted to leave the house. I was even thinking of getting a job after I passed my O’levels.

According to above explanation it could be identify that the emergence of deprivation amongst the Tamil youths as a cause of unemployment. At the end of 1970s unemployment was increased among every strata of Tamil youth in Jaffna society. The percentage of unemployment was, 11 percent of Sri Lankan Tamils (Tambiah, 1986,p. 153). As mentioned above there were some opportunities in the private sector for the elite class Tamil youths, according to the survey of the Siri Hettige in the Northern and Eastern province,the majority of the Tamil youths did not prefer to join private sector (Hettige, 2004, p. 123). As mentioned Siri Hettige “in our surveys,over 50 percent of respondents overall and close to three-fourths of respondents from Tamil –dominated northern and eastern regions said they preferred government jobs” (Hettige, 2004, p. 123).A preference for public sector employment was based mainly on the perception of „security“ of the job. According to such different aspirations of Tamil youths, certain segment of upper level Tamil youths also had been waiting expecting suitable professions.

On the other hand, traditionally the Jaffna economy was based on white –colar professions, farming, fishing and

toddy tapping etc. As mentioned above, white – colar professions were awarded to only the upper strata group. Therefore number of Tamil community from bottom layers engaged in other mentioned miner grade professions .But after receive the education under post-colonial welfare policies ,majority segment of lower caste youth also highly expected to access white color professions. They no longer wished to remain in the traditional economy. Their expectation was upward social mobility. As pointed out Ragavan (2009)“As with any Jaffna Tamil middle class family, their aim was to educate their children and make them a doctor or engineer, there was a production line mentality. At least one child, the elder child, should try and become a doctor, an engineer or at the least an accountant. Due to the lack of resources or social limitations, that was the only goal.”Further Newton Gunasinghe argued „The system of recruitment on political patronage also favored the Sinhala youth. Irrespective of the regime being UNP or SLFP ,opportunities existed for Sinhala youth to build up patron –client linkages with local politicians and press themselves forward. The Tamil youth, especially the North and East ,did not enjoy this advantage ,as their local politicians centered regional ethnic parties ,enjoying no power at the center. Thus the expansion of the public sector was not merely an increase in the state regulation of the economy, it was, simultaneously, an area of expansion of job opportunities for Sinhala youth.” (Gunsinghe, 2004 p 101) . Therefore at the end of 1970 vast number of underemployed Tamil youths had been waiting in Jaffna peninsula with number of limitations to access to upward social mobility.

#### 4. Conclusions

As discussed above a bulk of Tamil youths had been living in 1970s, with lack of professional opportunities, limited resources and livelihood hardships. But after 1977 due to development of liberal economy, youths of urban areas received significant benefits and they acquired upward social mobility. Other than this westernize lifestyles were rapidly spread among urban Tamil and Sinhala youths due to industrial policy. Such developments were directly subjected to increase inspirations and expectations among rural Tamil youths. They also eager to acquire such benefits and western exposure like urban community. As mentioned above they did not prefer to engage in traditional professions which their parents had done. But existing socio –economic limitations were subjected to drop their expectations. Therefore they felt that they were relatively deprived in front of other benefitted youth. Under this condition most of Tamil youths were frustrated and escaped from their own house and connected with violent organizations with expecting up word social mobility.

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